From Warrior to Logistician

Learning to Run the Support Platoon, The Biggest in the Armor Battalion

by Captain John D. Fio Rito

At 0233 hours, your radio comes to life as some XO pleads for three quarts of Turboshaft. It seems that one of his tanks cannot LD at 0600 without it. As you drift in and out of consciousness, wondering if you're dreaming, the thought of fumbling around in the dark for a few cans of oil, not to mention the 20 km trip up to his assembly area, almost convinces you to roll over and pretend you didn't hear it. What do you do? Your job, of course. You roll out of your sleeping bag into the front seat of your HMMWV, go find the oil, and start your trip. You are the support platoon leader.

The support platoon is, arguably, the most complex and important platoon in the Armor battalion. With 40-plus vehicles, and more than twice that in personnel, it has the mission of providing all the food, fuel, ammunition, and medium transportation to a 600-man armor battalion, a prodigious task to say the least.

With all that said, I know of no doctrine, besides the MTP and a few short paragraphs in *FM 71-2*, and *FM 71-123*, that gives the support platoon leader any idea how to lead his platoon or, at the very least, how it's supposed to function or operate. It seems that, while the scouts have SPLC, and the mortars have IMLC, the support platoon leader has only OJT.

The purpose of this article is to share some of my experiences as support platoon leader of an armor battalion. It is based on 15 months experience, including deployments to Kuwait and the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC). I will address the shock of going from warrior to logistician, taking command of your new platoon, working for your boss (or rather bosses), and good attributes to possess as the support platoon leader. I will use examples, both good and bad, of what happened to me.

"Congratulations, lieutenant, you're the new support platoon leader! I know you wanted the scouts, but I convinced the commander that support was right up your alley. You don't have to thank me; the look on your face is thanks enough!" With that, the CSM left the room and so began what would be one of the most difficult and rewarding experiences of my career. For a young 2LT who has been led to believe that the warriors ride off into the sunset with the princess and the REMFs clean up after the horses, this was a traumatic event. The removal from my tank platoon after only 10 months and the thrusting into this unknown entity of support is equivalent to an infant being yanked from the womb. Hell, no, I didn't want to go, and I made it clear to every deaf ear I could find. In the end, however, my new call sign was Support 1 and my battle chariot reduced to an M998 cargo HMMWV.

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I share this with you because most support platoon leader "elects" have the same reaction. The world of logistics is not only an enigma to be feared, but for a bold, audacious lieutenant of armor, it's a position to be scorned. In my ignorance and inexperience, I thought food, fuel, and ammo "just showed up," like manna from heaven deposited from on high when I needed it. As a tank platoon leader, I definitely could not even begin to tell anyone what the support platoon leader did or what made up his platoon. The world, however, is a lot larger and more complex than my limited perception, and I was about to be introduced to a world of responsibility I had not known existed.

The platoon has almost 100 soldiers moving in about that many directions, and meeting it for the first time borders on terrifying. Fortunately for me, it was almost 60 days before I met my platoon in its entirety. Of course, I'm being somewhat facetious, but with everything the support platoon does, I couldn't correctly identify members of my platoon two out of three times in a line-up. To mitigate this "knowledge deficiency," first acquaint yourself with your platoon on paper. Read the MTOE, look at the current organization of equipment and personnel to see if it differs. Look at the current personnel strength and OR rate and look at names and bumper numbers to have a general idea of who is a "cargo," who is a "fueler," who is a cook, and what bumper numbers belong to each type of their trucks. Do all this before you sit down with your platoon sergeant for the first time. This will show you are interested in your new job, that you're a competent officer, and that you're on top of things right from the start.

All units "test" their new leaders, but support platoon soldiers are a different breed from 19Ks, and you need to show your strengths and abilities right from the start. Also, all the things your PSG tells you during your first meeting will make a lot more sense if you've done your homework. The first impression you give will be how the entire platoon views you by the end of the day.

After meeting your platoon sergeant and getting an overview, go meet and be briefed by your section sergeants. Again, do your homework before you get there — bumper numbers, OR of his trucks and equipment, names of soldiers, and any major problems they may have that you as the platoon leader should know about. I also suggest having each section sergeant walk you through a PMCS of his equipment. This will give you an idea of the pride he has in his fleet, his proficiency, and his ability to teach a new soldier about the section's equipment. It's

good for you because you need to know the capabilities and limitations of your equipment. When I took over, I couldn't even spell HEMTT (heavy expanded mobility tactical truck) let alone know what to check on this vehicle that was so different from a tank.

Following your section sergeants, meet your ammo NCO. Nothing will ruin your day quicker than losing accountability of CL V, or having the battalion's ammo account frozen because of delinquent documents. A good ammo NCO won't let either happen to you (it's your signature on the 581s). Sit down with him and have him brief you on his entire operation — from the time the S3 forecasts ammo until the last residue is turned in. Beware of things that seem "shady" to you. It's nice when your ammo NCO can produce CL V on request; however, if he does this by getting it out of his garage at home, you may have something to worry about.

Your ammo NCO should have a good relationship with the S3 shop, specifically the master gunner, and be present when ammunition is the topic of conversation. It's not uncommon for a great plan produced in the S3 shop to go amiss for lack of input from the guy who actually has his hands on the rounds. I suggest you visit the division ammunition office/officer (DAO) and see their operation firsthand. Also go to the ammunition supply point (ASP) and the ammunition holding area (AHA) to view their operation. One way to do this is to go on an ammo pickup to get a feel for the time involved in the procedure. It's very easy to sit in your office and wonder why it's taking so long to draw ammunition if you've never done it. This will keep you from promising ammo and not being able to deliver. The more you know about the mechanics of the operation, the more informed decisions you can make.

Your POL NCO is responsible for stocking and operating the Class III package shed and bulk Class III. This includes ordering, issuing, and securing package products; and the request (forecast) and pick-up of the Class III bulk. He ensures the fuel HEMTTs are all topped off and sufficient package products are on hand. He tracks consumption and loss; requests and submits the monthly reports for your approval prior to them going to the battalion XO/CDR. Like you did with the ammo NCO, you should have him brief you on his operation from start to finish. It's very easy to fear the unknown and shy away from his operation, but you should know the POL NCO's job well enough to ensure it is being done correctly. Finding out the day you're going to the field that the battalion is zero balance on fuel or critical package products is the wrong time to realize he may not be doing his job correctly.

Now, tour the dining facility and see what your food service section does. Shortly after I took over the platoon, all the food service sections were consolidated into a brigade section. Even though they still fell under me for vehicle maintenance, accountability, and administrative actions, their day-to-day operations were controlled by the brigade DFAC NCOIC.

Before I move on to the next group of people, I want to reiterate the importance of knowing what everyone in the platoon is supposed to do and know yourself how to do it and how long it takes. This will obviously take some time and effort, but it will benefit you in the long run if you are well versed in everything your soldiers do. It can't hurt to know how to submit an ammunition request, forecast fuel, or lube a HEMTT.

Next go meet everyone that supports you at the forward support battalion (FSB). Believe it or not, or like it or not, the world of logistics, at least in my experience, is a lot of "back scratching." Whereas one of the permutations of the golden rule is that "those who have the gold make the rule," here "those who have the supplies can make things easy or hard." This sounds pessimistic, I know, but what is going to streamline things when you're in a crunch is how good your working relationship is with those who support you. What's going to make a clerk in the CL III yard go that extra "mile" at 1630 on Friday is not your bar, but your attitude. It's a lot harder to deny someone something when you've met them and have a good impression. In that vein, the world of the FSB is a world unto itself (imagine your platoon times 10) and its soldiers a slightly different breed. Soldiers no better or worse than your own, but still different. Your ability to modify your leadership style to the situation will be a great asset.

You probably have not gotten this far without meeting your "boss," but this area can be somewhat sticky and so it deserves some mention. Your boss is the S4. He is the logistical planner and you are the executor, and, in a utopian world, it would end there and everything would be great. However, it is my experience that there is a shortage of captains to fill positions such as the S4 and so the job falls to a first lieutenant. You are probably a first lieutenant or a senior second lieutenant and it is here that the problem may arise. Although it is not unprecedented for a lieutenant to rate a lieutenant, it is frowned upon. Therefore, in the above scenario, the HHC commander will rate you. This in itself is not bad, the HHC commander is a huge help with the FSB as the primary liaison between it and the battalion. It's when the lines between boss and rater become blurred that the delicate synergy between planner, executor, and liaison breaks down and problems may arise. I'm not speaking of careerism and saying that some may only do what their rater says so they get a good "grade." However, even if we don't want to admit it, there is the underlying thought of pleasing our rater and also the supposition of the rater that he must develop you. This is all personality dependent; in some cases, this is never a problem and in some cases it is.

Additionally, be aware that in the field, with the scouts and mortars working for the battalion commander, the medics with the companies or in the MAS/FAS, and the mechanics also with the companies or with the BMO, there is no one left in the BSA except you and your platoon. Therefore, you may receive a lot of attention. This is not necessarily bad but, although your soldiers live in the BSA and are at the HHC 1SG's disposal for guard and details, your primary duty is to run LOGPAC and execute the S4's plan. Finally, I need to mention the S3. He has the oak leaf cluster trump card, and when it comes to procuring CL V for the training he has planned, you will definitely work for him. As far as people in your food chain, there you have it — at least three people (not including the battalion commander) that at any one time will offer input. I can't really offer a solution here as it is a matter of the group dynamics of your unit. In some cases it's a juggling act, and in some cases it's not. I thought it might help to offer this as insight.

In May of 1996, Team D from 3-8 Cav deployed to JRTC in support of the 2nd Bde, 25th ID. The team was composed of 10 M1A2 tanks, six M2A2 BFVs, a platoon of mechanized engineers, and the company headquarters vehicles. In support of the team, I deployed as the CSS LNO. My package consisted of four fuel HEMTTs, four cargo HEMTTs, one 25-ton low-boy, a maintenance support team (MST) from the FSB with six vehicles, my HMMWV, and a total of 30 soldiers. Similar to our mission at Ft. Hood, our mission at JRTC was to provide the team with food, fuel, ammunition, and transportation. Unlike Ft. Hood, I was the only officer from HHC deploying, and in addi-

tion to my regular mission, I was responsible for performing the duties of S1, S4, BMO, and HHC commander for the heavy team. Additionally, I was the only "heavy" guy in the BSA and soon realized that the light infantry didn't have the assets or any idea how to support us. Without replaying the entire month-long rotation, I'll address the lessons learned:

First, set yourself up for success. I mistakenly brought the two squads I thought would benefit the most from a training center. I quickly realized that bringing the weakest squads in my platoon to JRTC to train them was not a great idea. Although they did learn a lot, a better idea would have been to bring well-trained squads with members of the weak squads as augmentees. I found myself continually pulled away from my duties to deal with problems that never should have happened. Also, I didn't bring my platoon sergeant or a section sergeant. I thought that since 80 percent of the platoon was still at home station, they should remain behind. I soon recognized that mistake as well.

Second, delegate your authority. I tried to do everything myself. I didn't feel comfortable delegating anything because I had never worked in the BSA in my current capacity, acting as the S1, S4, BMO, and HHC commander, in addition to my usual duties. I also didn't have faith in anyone else doing it correctly. I guess this is a very arrogant and inexperienced way to think (although I think most people do it), but I learned my lesson. Very quickly I was overwhelmed by the sheer number of tasks I had to accomplish. Toward the end of the time in the "box," I began to delegate duties down to my NCOs and some of my soldiers. This not only took a huge burden off me, but the soldiers enjoyed the increased responsibility.

Third, become fully integrated into the unit you are working with. Know what you can do for them and what they can do for you. The "light" guys were very eager to be of any assistance, but knew nothing about supporting a heavy team and I knew nothing about being light. To illustrate this, let me indulge in a war story. I had a tank forward module waiting on the D-rear airstrip for two days. When I finally asked when it was going to be lifted to the BSA, the SPO told me he had limited air assets and that my CL IX was not an urgent priority. I explained to him that for a light infantryman CL IX probably is not a priority, but for a tanker it means that I've had a vehicle out of the fight for two days, not to mention that one tank probably has the firepower of an entire light battalion. Of course, he didn't like the firepower comparison, but he did understand my point and my part was on the next helicopter. Had I voiced my concerns earlier, instead of thinking "someone" was taking care of it, I could have put a tank back into the battle earlier. This entire episode was an illustration of poor integration and communication.

Finally, force protection is of the utmost importance, especially for CSS assets. Logistics are the soft under-belly of any operation. Tankers think of fighting in the deserts of the Middle East, not in the forests of Louisiana. Subsequently, the CSS soldiers in an armor battalion have the same notion of the enemy. They are used to being at least 15 km behind the FLOT and relatively safe, hardly ever seeing the enemy. Therefore, they are more lax in security and lacking in basic soldier skills such as building a fighting position, reacting to contact, and dismounted patrolling. These are things we never practiced because we never needed to, but which resulted in many "casualties" during the rotation. The perception of wide open spaces and seeing the enemy at 4,000 meters is quickly shattered when a six-man squad destroys an entire LOGPAC and the tanks can't get into the fight because they're out of fuel. The OPFOR quickly realized they never had to engage the heavy team, all they had to do was to destroy the LOGPACs. We learned the hard way that we needed to get back to basic soldiering skills and fieldcraft.

Those are some lessons learned from JRTC that can be applied to many situations. It was the most difficult operation I had done until that time and remains one of the best learning experiences I've had. It was an eye-opening experience for a cocky young lieutenant and soon I would get the chance to put those lessons to use on another deployment.

On September 19, 1996, the 1st Cavalry Division alerted 3-8 Cav for a possible deployment to Kuwait on a show of force mission. Five days later, we were in Doha drawing our equipment in a sand storm. Once again, I'll spare you all the gory details and concentrate on the lessons learned.

Force protection was again paramount. We faced a very real threat in Kuwait even after we realized the Iraqis weren't coming south. Every day we were briefed on the terrorist threat level. We carried live ammunition in our weapons, and we practiced ambush reaction drills. But I did make a few mistakes. LOGPAC turnaround in the first two weeks took well over six hours, unlike the two-hour window allotted by SOP. My mistake was that I was only worried about a threat while we were traveling between the BSA and the kabals. Once we arrived at the logistics release point (LRP), I felt we were out of danger. However, we were actually more at risk while we waited for the 1SGs to return their LOGPACs because we were a sitting target. We would sit at the LRP, in the middle of the desert, literally for hours, waiting for one truck to return. It took me about a week of this nightly ritual to realize my mistake. Very simply, I instituted an early return and a late return. Those trucks returning in the allotted time went back immediately with my platoon sergeant. Any company who couldn't make the window would deliver their LOGPAC to me at the CTCP kabal, and, once I got them all back, we would depart for the BSA. It was not an option for the 1SGs to bring their LOGPAC back to the BSA because it was a 100 km round trip and, on the return trip, they would be traveling alone.

My second learning point was to keep strict accountability of our ammunition. This sounds pretty obvious, but it wasn't until the third week "in-country" that I realized, that although we had the correct quantity of each type of ammunition, we also had some incorrect lot numbers. This turned into a nightmare that lasted several weeks. On the first day in country, each support platoon will draw the battalion's unit basic load (UBL) from the ammunition transfer point (ATP). The ATP is nothing more than a spot in the desert with stacks and stacks of ammunition as far as you can see. It's almost a free-for-all in the sense that you show up with your trucks, the DAO hands you a stack of 581s, and you go to the designated pile and start uploading. The problem was that three support platoons, including mine, hit the ATP at the same time and started to upload.

Things were hectic to say the least. It was dark, and on the first day in country, it still looked like the Iraqis were going to cross the border. Once we had our ammunition, I signed the 581s and we were off. It wasn't until we issued the ammunition that we realized our mistake. In the end, we had to upload several trucks with the mismatched ammo and drive to every kabal in the brigade. Much to the surprise of every other support platoon leader, I showed them that we all had mismatched ammunition. It was no small task, but I

Continued on Page 38

From Warrior to Logistician, *continued from Page 25*

learned the important lesson of tracking everything not only by quantity, but lot number as well.

The distances traveled during LOGPAC made it critical that the LOGSTATs from the companies were correct and the packages built at the BSA contained everything listed on them. In the field at home station, the BSA or field trains were never very far from the assembly areas. If a LOGPAC was missing something, I could always go back and get it. It is sad to say, but in my experience (prior to Kuwait) there was never any real emphasis put on logistics. When we went to the field at home station, the focus rested solely on maneuver; we never trained our logistic tail. In Kuwait, however, it was apparent that the logistic tail had the very real probability of "wagging the dog." Our logistic plan was based on reaction instead of anticipation and it was not going to work in our current AO. 1SGs who were not used to submitting a complete and correct LOGSTAT found themselves wanting for essential items. It was no longer possible for me to just turn around and go back to the field trains.

This aspect of the rotation taught me, and a few others I believe, how important a well-thought out logistical plan is. Logistics is based on anticipation and planning. Reacting to events as they arise will not only put undue stress on yourself and your soldiers, but it will also have a disastrous effect on the morale and welfare of the soldiers you are supporting.

These are a few of the lessons learned from my experience as a support platoon leader. I've omitted some and covered others in a perfunctory manner, but it runs the gamut from wide-eyed ignorance to a successful overseas deployment.

Being the support platoon leader is a fantastic job because you do your job every day. Whether in garrison or in the field, every day you are supplying the food, fuel, and ammunition that allows the battalion to function. Everyone is different and obviously what worked for me may not work for you. However, this piece should offer the novice support platoon leader the opportunity to learn from some of my experiences (and mistakes). Good luck!

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